Lucas Van Leyden: Prints from the Testaments

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Brother Daniel Burke FSC

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Lucas van Leyden
Prints From The Testaments

LaSalle College Art Museum
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For many years, students of La Salle College had the privilege of pursuing a course in the history of graphic art at the Alverthorpe Gallery in nearby Jenkintown. Lessing Rosenwald himself would on occasion join our Professor Thomas Ridington or Herman Gundersheimer and the students for an afternoon with Rembrandt, Dürer, or Lucas van Leyden. After Mr. Rosenwald's death and the transfer of his collection to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the course had to be pursued, it need hardly be said, in much reduced circumstances.

But the present exhibition, which returns many of Mr. Rosenwald's Lucas van Leyden prints from the National Gallery to the Rosenwald Room in the La Salle Museum, recreates briefly for us the happy circumstances of earlier, halcyon days. For making this small but choice exhibition possible, then, we are indebted chiefly to the National Gallery of Art (also for permission to draw upon the splendid catalogue by Ellen S. Jacobowitz and Stephanie Loeb Stepanek for their exhibition of Lucas van Leyden last year); to the Library of Congress (another major beneficiary of Mr. Rosenwald's princely generosity); and to Margot Dolen and the Associated American Artists.

Daniel Burke, FSC
Director
Lucas van Leyden (1489/94?-1533), Dutch

Lucas van Leyden, with his German contemporary, Albrecht Dürer, is in the first rank of Renaissance engravers. Although he was an accomplished painter, his engravings were and remain the source of his fame. In particular, he is considered by scholars to have achieved a greater range of expression with the engraver's burin than with the painter's brush.

His prodigious talent was manifest in the engraving *Mahomet and The Monk Sergius*, 1508, which he may have done when he was only fourteen. He was the pupil of his father, Hugh Jacobsz, and Cornelius Engelbrechtz, but it was Dürer who exercised the most profound influence on Lucas' style. He was also indebted to the paintings of Jan Gossaert and, toward the end of his career, to the very classical works of the Italian engraver, Marcantonio Raimondi.

Although he was interested in themes which concerned contemporary artists in portraiture, allegory, mythology, and genre, the majority of Lucas' 177 engravings and his 110 woodcuts are concerned with Old and New Testament themes, the subject of this exhibition.

Lucas seldom left his native town of Leyden, but he successfully absorbed the style of the Italian Renaissance with its humanistic values and its naturalistic rendition of figures and forms convincingly organized in a seemingly three-dimensional space. Yet, through most of his career, his works exhibit a notable degree of originality and imagination; they reveal a generally independent approach to traditional Biblical themes. It should be
recalled that during Lucas' time, Dutch and Flemish artists of the Netherlands (now Holland and Belgium), were just beginning to employ the fully realistic Renaissance style which had been practiced in Italy for over a hundred years. Perhaps, with the exception of the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, (Dutch, 1450/60-1516), Biblical art of the Netherlands, until Lucas' time, remained other-worldly and even mystical (see painting of The Nativity by Jan Provost in our 16th century gallery). By comparison, in Lucas' works, the Biblical event takes place within the everyday observable world and the scene moves into the here and now. It is the concern for human behavior in his prints that becomes especially noticeable. The people in the crowd who witness the event, and sometimes the chief Biblical characters themselves, appear to be based on the artist's observations of the ordinary man in contemporary Dutch life. And it is their individuality, which Lucas so vividly portrays through a careful delineation of facial expressions, gestures, and calculated reactions to the Biblical event, often at the moment of decision or controversy, which achieves prominence. In a sense then, his Biblical engravings become almost as much psychological studies of human nature as religious narrative.

Lucas was frequently more interested in provoking and questioning than in revealing the outcome of a story, and he was always intrigued with the emotional or psychological responses of his figures to the circumstances facing them. This manner of presentation encouraged the viewer's participation, a concern which is evident throughout Lucas' career.... The events of a story are cast in a manner consciously
meant to be understood in immediate terms and the prints become extraordinarily accessible. (NGA, 24)

Thus, Lucas' naturalistic style and his emphasis on the moral dilemma associated with the Biblical event, is a reflection of both the Renaissance man's endeavor to understand the world and his place in it as well as the reformer's concern with personal reflection on and interpretation of the Bible.

The prints exhibited here also reveal Lucas' virtuoso technical skill in exploiting the expressive possibilities of the engraving medium. The realism of his space and depth is exceptional for the period. His forms and figures are harmoniously integrated within complex compositions, all clearly delineated through subtle gradation of tones hitherto unseen in Northern graphic art. By comparison, the prints of his German contemporaries, seen here in the hall bookcases, often appear harsh and linear with their stark contrasts of light and shade and less clearly defined background, middle ground, and foreground.

Thus, as one considers Lucas' masterly achievement, and compares his works to the Northern art just prior to or even during his career, it is easy to realize that he was both an innovator and precursor. In terms of psychological depth and expressive use of the medium, Lucas' engraved works are considered unsurpassed in Holland until the age of Rembrandt in the 17th century. And it is generally recognized that his insightful portrayal of the human condition foreshadows the great age of Dutch genre painting in the next century.
Perhaps the words of the renowned Northern Renaissance art historian, Max Friedländer, summarize Lucas' unique standing in the visual arts on the eve of the Reformation: "His narratives carry an element of enlightenment and interpretation and are socially oriented. His figures were not to be proudly enthroned on high, heroic, godlike, saintly savours, aloof in isolation. Man was down here on earth, a creature of the herd, subject to the same laws as others, with no rank to distinguish him."

One of the trademarks of Lucas' style was an especially shallow and fine linear system. The furrows wore quickly and few good impressions could be pulled before substantial losses had occurred. As a result, proportionally fewer good impressions of each of his images exist than, for example, do those of Dürer's engravings. (NGA, 20)

According to lawsuits involved in settling Lucas' estate, the husband of his natural daughter Marijtgen, Damma Claesz. de Hoey, took possession of the engraved plates and received income from their further publication. The plates later afforded remuneration to Martini Petri of Antwerp (1500-c. 1565), who reworked them. Because Lucas' prints were so popular, they were printed frequently and copied extensively, thus giving rise to the many poor impressions known today as well as the numerous versions of the various images. (NGA, 13)

The commentary for the prints exhibited here has two parts. With the exception of the two Dürer prints and the detail from "The Temptation of Christ" by Master LCz, the first part is concerned with the engravings of Lucas van Leyden. The second part lists a small collection of prints and
illustrated Bibles (from the Dunleavy Collection) by German contemporaries of Lucas'.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

1. Ellen S. Jacobwitz and Stephanie Loeb Stepanek
The Prints of Lucas van Leyden & His Contemporaries
(Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1983); p.60
Hereafter cited as NGA + page number

2. Max J. Friedländer,
Early Netherlandish Painting:
Lucas van Leyden and other Dutch Masters of His Time: Vol. X
(A.J. Sijthoff, Leyden, 1973); p.61
Abigail and David, by 1508

During his exile in the wilderness, David asked local farmers for supplies for his troops. As heir apparent to the crown of Israel through God's intervention, he was entitled to make such demands. Nabal, a man "churlish and evil in his doings," refused to acknowledge David's request and his legitimate rights. Prepared to make an example of him, David threatened to slaughter Nabal's entire household. His wife Abigail saved the day by accepting David's political position; she appeased the future king by bringing an elaborate feast to him and his men. In return, David granted his mercy, but when Nabal learned of his wife's deed, he fell ill and died. Recognizing God's reproach of Nabal, David then took Abigail as his wife....

In the Speculum Humane Salvationis prior to Lucas' time, this subject had been regarded as the prefiguration of the Virgin Mary as defender of mankind; as Abigail appeased David, so Mary interceded on behalf of man before God....

One of Lucas' most distinguishing characteristics is revealed by this early effort. He demonstrates an ambitious nature, a predilection for depicting narrative pictures filled with a complex array of figures, objects, and anecdotal detail. As Lucas was trained by painters, it is not surprising that his images recall the intricate compositions of his predecessors in Netherlandish painting. He is noted for attempting to show an empirically accurate projection into deep space, this overcoming the ambiguous placement of the background generally seen in the graphic works of both his predecessors and contemporaries.... (NGA, 40).

Lent by The National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1950

David Playing the Harp before Saul, c. 1508

Van Mander cited this engraving as a noteworthy example of the correct portrayal of insanity. The subject is unusual for the early sixteenth century....

One is struck by the directness and immediacy of Lucas' presentation of this story, and by the vivid and incisive characterization of the two principal figures. At this time in his career, Lucas repeatedly demonstrated unusual concern for the near and precise location of the audience. Again, it is the moment of psychological confrontation and dilemma before the active climax that interested him. The viewer is left to speculate about the outcome; will the music soothe Saul's troubled soul or will he throw his pointed weapon?...

Panofsky has noted that "as the main characteristic of the melancholy man in popular medieval writing was glumness and drowsiness, his type...
was modelled upon the pattern of Sloth..." Visually, this means the melancholic was an inactive figure, perhaps one paralyzed by thought like Saul. In mentioning that melancholia was regarded in earlier medical books as a disease of the mind, and in illustrating a method of treatment through which "Melancholy derangement could be cured by music," Panofsky confirms the interpretation of Saul as suffering from melancholia.... (NGA, 64)

Lent by The National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1950

Fig. 1.

3.

Susanna and the Two Elders, c. 1508

Susanna, the loyal and God-fearing wife of Joachim, was the object of constant observation and fantasy for two townsmen. They secretly watched her bathe and conspired to commit adultery with her. When they finally attempted it, Susanna resisted their advances. The rejected men then took revenge by falsely accusing her of adultery. Susanna had already been judged and condemned when the young lawyer Daniel interceded on her behalf. By examining the plaintiffs separately, he proved that their statements were contradictory and subject to penalty for bearing false witness....

One of the most striking aspects of this work is the reversal of the subject's traditional pictorial format. Generally, Susanna at her bath is the central focus. Here, the scheming elders are the center of attention. By placing them on an extremely narrow foreground stage, Lucas emphasizes their psychological interchange, drawing the viewer into the composition and practically into their conspiracy. This emphasis on the intense but inactive conversational attitudes stresses the conspiratorial rather than erotic aspects of the story; the lascivious glance of the standing elder and the pointed gesture of his seated companion become the only indications of their true intentions. Characteristically, it is not the climax of the narrative that Lucas depicted but a contemplative moment prior to action....

The present engraving is one of the most refined and exquisite of Lucas' career.... (NGA, 68)


Fig. 2.
The Round Passion

"Christ Before Annas"

"The Flagellation"

"The Crowning with Thorns"

The 1509 series of the Round Passion marked a dramatic change in Lucas' work in two respects. First, the mood of the characters, once gentle and restrained in the manner of Geertgen tot Sint Jans, became tense and emotional. Second, the finely crosshatched and narrowly spaced lines and soft nuances of tone perfected in the early works were replaced by broader, harder, and less painterly effects....

Nicholas Beets attributed this new expressive character to the influence of Cornelis Engebrechtz., who, according to van Mander, became Lucas' teacher about this time....

The probability of another common source must be considered. Of special interest are Dürer's woodcuts in The Large Passion series of 1497-1499. (See illustration in book below.) A number of motifs which account for the increased emotional intensity in Lucas' work find their origin in Dürer's models: note in particular the contorted postures, the wild gestures, and the more expressive faces. This exaggerated emotive character is a distinguishing characteristic of early Dürer, but it is alien to the art of Leiden and Haarlem.... (NGA, 78)

Lent by The National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943

5.

The Return of the Prodigal Son, c. 1510

This print reveals Lucas' interest in two related social and religious issues: concern for the growing number of vagabonds and concern for repentance and faith. He has chosen two episodes from the story of the Prodigal Son to illustrate these concerns. As a profligate wanderer, having squandered his inheritance and been reduced to tending pigs (far right middle ground), the prodigal son exemplified the dissolute individual. As a returning penitent who is blessed by his father and welcomed by the slaughter of a calf for the feast (left middle ground), he exemplified man redeemed by faith and divine mercy....

In this engraving Lucas created one of the clearest and most successful perspectival studies of his career, and one of the best renditions of a plausible and realistic landscape in the manner of late fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting. His interest in this problem is unmatched by any of his contemporaries, and its successful resolution is one of the
According to Craig Harbison, this print is a pictorial reflection of contemporary thought regarding Christian baptism; it predates written expression by over a decade. In the profoundly unsettled period of the early sixteenth century, many long-held beliefs were being questioned. The growing Protestant movement, for example, challenged the traditional church on several issues. One of the most important controversies between these two groups was the question of whether or not an individual who had not experienced the ritual act of baptism could win entrance to Heaven. The Catholic and Lutheran churches believed in the necessity of the ritual; more radical Protestant movements put more emphasis on the force of faith and the inner attitude of the person to be baptized. Central to this controversy was the belief that children should not be punished for their parents' omissions; the children in Lucas's print are surely included to illustrate this issue....

Lucas relegated the baptismal act to the background, placing the bystanders, who appear to be debating the issue, in the foreground. Harbison notes that this reversal of subject matter, as well as the absence of the dove, is unusual in representations of this theme. The reversed composition occurs frequently in Lucas's work, and it is the but one device he used to shift the emphasis so that a particular act becomes merely the source of controversy and the controversy itself becomes the main subject.... (NGA, 90)

The Story of Joseph, a series of five prints marks a significant moment of transition in Lucas's style. It is the end of a period characterized by...
by a search for technical understanding of the graphic medium, by student pieces impatiently exploring artistic problems, and by ambitious masterpieces still bearing slight imperfections, and the beginning of a seven- or eight-year span remarkable for its stylistic consistency and refinement....

The new spatial constructions seen in these prints appear to have been modeled on Dürer's woodcut series The Life of the Virgin. Lucas borrowed the unadorned architectural structures, reducing the monumental scale of the German prototypes to a more intimate horizontal format where the figures are given greater prominence. The organization of interior space in these prints is much more realistic and convincing than that in earlier efforts; to show Lucas' improvement in this area, one need only compare this series to the noticeably less skillful David Playing the Harp before Saul.... (See No. 2)

The most obvious change in appearance from the prints of the previous period is that in the tonal scale. The extremely broad range seen in the pre-1510 engravings is replaced by a much more limited one emphasizing the middle gray tones.... (NGA, 98)

Lent by The National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943/1946

8.
Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), German
"Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple" c. 1503-04 from The Life of the Virgin, 1511.
Proof before text.
Woodcut
76-G-583

8.a
Soldiers Giving the Saviour to Drink, 1513
76-B-1(f)7

9.
Solomon's Idolatry, 1514

The story of Solomon was not only popular as a part of the iconography of the Power of Women theme, but also had contemporary significance as an admonition against the worship of false idols. Here the strange idol appears to be a combination of several forms traditionally represented in depictions of this subject, and the various objects associated with it seem to mock Solomon, who was led to his idolatry by his pagan wives and concubines. The global seal, for example, may refer to Nemesis, who was shown in the Master MZ's print, or to the unstable and transient nature of early love. The flame, satyr ears, and skull reinforce...
this interpretation, the first two being symbols of lust, and the third a traditional memento mori motif....

As first mentioned in the discussion of the Story of Joseph, Dürer's Life of the Virgin series seems to have been an important source for Lucas' prints of this period (See No.8 ). In the latter, the artist's interest in architecture was linked closely with his study of perspective. After 1510, Lucas' concern with the precise location of the observer had manifested itself, but this is the earliest engraving in which the station point is so precisely defined.... (NGA, 136)

Lent by The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Fig. 7

10.

David's Triumph. 1514

Lent by The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

11.

The Triumph of Mordecai, 1515

The Persian King Ahasuerus, wishing to honor the Jew Mordecai for his fidelity to the court, asked his chief minister Haman for advice. Thinking the honor was meant for him, Haman suggested clothing the man to be honored in the King's apparel and letting him ride through the city accompanied by the King's princes and nobles....

Presented here in the traditional format of Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, this subject would have been an appropriate one to honor Charles V on his entry into Leiden in 1515. Triumphal entries for members of the ruling class were by no means unusual in this period, and visual prototypes would have been readily available to Lucas....

In the choice of subject matter Lucas remained consistent, continuing to prefer narratives requiring elaborate figural compositions filled with a wealth of genre and anecdotal detail.... (NGA, 142)

Lent by the National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943

Fig. 5

12.

Esther before Ahasuerus, 1518

King Ahasuerus of Persia took as his wife Esther, a Jewish beauty who concealed her religion from him. When a death edict was placed
upon her people, the Queen's cousin Mordecai encouraged Esther to go before her husband and petition for the Jews' salvation. Lucas depicts the moment in the story when Ahasuerus takes his gold scepter, lays it upon a supplicant Esther, and bids her to speak.... [The edict was revoked.]

Even in the numerous prints by Lucas which may seem to be straightforward biblical tales or genre scenes, there are often other interpretations or meanings which would have been immediately apparent in the sixteenth century. Viewers of this period were quite used to looking for hidden messages behind traditional subject matter, and they were prepared to decipher numerous symbols in each work. Thus Old Testament scenes like this or Abigail and David would have been recognized as prefigurations of the Virgin Mary as defender of mankind....

Throughout his career, Lucas' work exhibited a strong awareness of human nature and a keen dramatic sense, but not since David Playing the Harp before Saul of about 1508 had he created an engraving with the sensitive characterization seen here. Moreover, this print depicts one of the clearest and most convincing projections of figures in interior space in Lucas' work so far....

Lucas continuously refined his burin work in the period from 1512 onward; the greater variety, fluidity, and pervasiveness of lines and stippling permitted him to improve the chiaroscuro system and to produce a more luminous and spacious environment....

The careful orchestration of compositional design and pictorial mood make the prints of this period among the most brilliant achievements of Lucas' career....

An overall vibrating quality of light gives a matte silver tone rather than the bland, gray tone of five years earlier.... (NGA,186)

Lent by The National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943

Fig. 8

13.

The Temptation of Christ, 1518

Lucas' version of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness makes a striking comparison with that of the Master LCz (see No.14). The German print from the Schongauer circle is more typical of the representations of this subject of c. 1500-1505, in depicting Satan as a monster. Lucas' Satan takes on a human form, revealing his true identity only by his clawed feet and the snake head at the end of his hood. It might be suggested that this sensible, credible looking personage is in keeping with the new Erasmian "scientific" theology....(NGA, 184)
14. Master LCz, (Lorenz Katzheizer), German, active c. 1480-c. 1505

Detail of
The Temptation of Christ, c. 1500
Engraving
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. William K. Sherwin

15. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), German

The Fall of Man, 1504

The iconography, so often a rich, didactic part of Renaissance art, alludes here to the four temperaments (represented by the cat, rabbit, bull and elk) of man's constitution, in perfect balance before The Fall and to the transgression of God's law that is about to occur.

The rather heavily inked and somewhat worn quality of this second state impression, the heavy striations in the upper right corner, and the five millimeter discrepancy in height are just some of the unique qualities that still present an unresolved problem to connoisseurs. After microscopic examinations by curators and conservators at Harvard, Yale, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and the Albertina, Vienna, conclusions ranged from it being an undeclared state coming between Meder's second and third, final state to its being a highly deceptive photo-engraving, dating from between 1890 and 1910.

Lent by The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 6
Lucas depicted the Fall of Man seven times in his graphic oeuvre. In this seventh version of 1530, he repeated the unorthodox composition with seated figures found in his earliest representation of about 1508. Similarities between the two compositions terminate with this comparison, however, for in the intervening period Lucas progressed from the depiction of doll-like figures in a northern primeval setting to a blatant acclamation of the idealized male and female form in an Italianate landscape. In 1518 Lucas had experimented with a Dürer-esque type (see cat. No. 15) in which the elongated torso, the narrow chest and small breasts, and the prominent stomach were combined with the Renaissance acceptance of nudity....

The engraved works of 1527 to 1530 are executed with a new technical vocabulary, again derived from Italian inspiration. The linear system is now so precise and schematic as to be repeatable; it is regularized and cool to the point of severity; it is so sure that it fulfills with ease and economy the functions of modeling, creating texture, and establishing a coherent design.... (NGA, 242)


18.

Christ Crowned with Thorns, 1519

Lent by The National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943

19.

St. Joachim Embracing St. Anna at the Golden Gate, 1520

Lent by The National Gallery of Art, Rosenwald Collection, 1943

20.

From The Passion series of 1521

"The Last Supper"

Lent by The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
CASE I

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), German
From The Engraved Passion series, 1512
21. "The Flagellation"
   76-B-1 (f) 6
22. "Christ Before Pilate"
   83-G-1237
Given by Dr. and Mrs. William K. Sherwin

Marcantonio Raimondi
(c. 1480-(1527-1534?), Italian
23. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
   Engraved copy after Dürrer's woodcut for the Life of the Virgin series, c. 1505
   76-B-196 (20)

CASE II

Heinrich Aldegrever (1502-1555/61), German
24. The Parable of the Good Samaritan, 1554
   Engraving
   (76-B-196 (12 & 13)

25. Jost Amman (1539-1591), German
   "Hannah Praying in the Temple"
   "Obadiah Hearing the Word of God"
   "Distribution of the White Robes"
   Woodcut illustrations for Biblia Sacra, Ad Vetustiosima Exemplaria Castigata (Sigismund Feiraben Francofurti, 1571)
   77-G-760, 763, 764

26. De Biblie uth der Vthleggine
   Doctoris Martini Luther's yn dyth düdesche....
   Printed by Ludowich Dietz, Lubeck, 1533, 1534
   Woodcut illustrations by Erhard Altdorfer (1512-1561), German
   78-B-181
   The first low German edition of Luther's Bible, translated by his colleague, Johann Bugenhagen, and issued just before Luther's own first complete edition of 1534.
CASE III

Hans Schaufelin (c. 1490-1540),
German

27. The Mocking of Christ
28. Christ in Limbo

Woodcut illustrations from
Speculum passionis domini
nostri Jhesu Christi. Per
Doctorem Udalricum Pinder
Nurembergae, 1507.
1st edition

77-G-764, 765

29. Le Premier volume de la Bible
en Francois
Paris, on les vend... par
Jacques Regnault, 1545

Anonymous woodcut illustrations
of the Apocalypse were influ­
enced by those of Lucas Cranach,
The Elder, executed for Luther's
Bible of 1522.

82-B-511

CASE IV

Lucas Cranach; 'lire Elder (1470-1553),
German

30. "Ecce Homo"

Woodcut illustration for Passio
D. N. Jesu Christi Vanustissimis
imaginibus eleganter expressa,
ab illustrissimi Saxoniae Ducis
Pictore Luca, Cranogio, 1509

76-B-1 (a) 8

Jerome Hopfer (active 1520-1535),
Dutch

31. Erasmus Rotterdodamus

Engraving

69P-1-E

3.2. Novum Testamentum...
AB Erasmo (Erasmus' New
Testament) Roterodamo
Recognitum... Basel:
Published by Johann Froben, 1522

77-B-58

This is the third edition of the
Latin translation of the Dutch
humanist, Desiderius Erasmus' Greek text of the New Testa­
ment. The first edition was
printed in folio in 1516, fol­
lowed by others in 1519, 1522,
1527 and 1535. His New Testament
was widely used by Protestant
biblical scholars and translators.
It has been said that it was the
basis of virtually every European vernacular translation of the New
Testament, including Luther's
German and Tyndale's English
version.

33. Catholische Postill by Johann Eck
Printed by Wolfgang Eder, at
Ingolstadt, 1583

The sixty one woodcut illustrations
are by various German, 16th century
artists who usually signed their works
in monogram, such as CF, CE, and HF.

77-B-13
The prints of Lucas van Leyden are catalogued in the following illustrated publications, all available in the La Salle Art Museum Reference Library:


